## Lord Jagannath & Ekanth Vaas

Lord Jagannath exists in the human form only in the Jagannath temple, at Puri, in Orissa. And like all of us, he too falls sick, his soul too sheds the existing body and assumes a new one after 14 days. Yes, read that again. And now read on to know more..

Lord Jagannath maintains silence and prefers his own company for 14 days, every year. And so does his sister Subhadra and brother Balarama too. This period is known as “Ekant Vaas.” But why? Let’s start at the beginning.

## Deities in the Lord Jagannath temple

Yes, Jagannath, the Lord of the cosmos, is enshrined in this beautiful temple, of course. But He is not alone. His elder sister, Subhadra (yellow idol) sits right at the centre on the Ratna Singhasana. Lord Jagannatha (black idol), her younger brother sits to her left. Balarama (fair idol), the elder brother of Subhadra sits to her right. Krishna’s Sudarshan Chakra (long red pillar) stands beside Lord Jagannath’s idol. These four idols are carved out of the wood procured from sacred Neem trees.

Sridevi and BhuDevi, the wives of Vishnu, sit near Lord Jagannath. And interestingly, Madanmohanji, the swaroop of a flute playing Krishna, which is made out of ashtadhatu (eight metals) also finds a place in the sanctum sanctorum.

## Significance of these idols

In the Jagannath temple, the spotlight is on Krishna’s childhood days when he spent all his time with his siblings. Krishna may have assumed a human form here for us.

But Krishna is Krishna. He is divine. And Krishna is Vishnu too. And lest we get carried away by the Leelas of his childhood days, his wives SriDevi and BhuDevi and the Sudarshan Chakra too are worshipped here.

## MadanMohanji, the Jagat Guru

MadanMohanji, a Nidhi Swaroop of Pushti Marg, is revered as the Jagat Guru. The essence of the main idol of Krishna, the Lord of the cosmos, the Nath of the Jag and MadanMohanji, the Jagat Guru, is the same.

Therefore the idol of MadanMohanji represents Lord Jagannath for most rituals in this temple at Puri. The large main idols of Jagannatha, Balarama, Subhadra and Sudarshan are taken out only during major festivals like the Rath Yatra.

## The Snana Yatra

Every year, in the month of Jyestha ( May-June) the idols of Lord Jagannath, Subhadra, Balabhadra and Sudarshan are brought out of the sanctum sanctorum and taken out on a procession to celebrate a bathing festival called Snana Yatra.

Summer is at its peak during this time. So on Snana Purnima (full moon day) the devotees and priests give all these idols a cooling bath with the sanctified water contained in 108 gold pots. It is believed that we can cleanse ourselves of our sins if we do the Snana darshan on this Purnima.

## Quarantined

Unfortunately, Lord Jagannath, Subhadra, Balabhadra and Sudarshan fall sick after the Snana Yatra. So they are quarantined in the Anasar Ghar (the recovery chamber) for 14 days, during the Krishna Paksh.  It is believed that Lord

Jagannath quarantines himself to protect his devotees from getting infected with his fever.

Only one Vaid and the main priest are granted entry into these chambers during this phase. Herbal medicines made out of dried ginger powder, cloves, cardamom, pepper and neem leaves are given to all the deities. They are put on a liquid diet for the first few days. Even fruits like bananas are not offered. After a few days, they are served a light meal of khichdi.

## Ekanth Vaas

The Gods reside in solitude. Silence is maintained around these chambers until they recover completely. Hence the phrase – “Ekantha Vaas.”

The temple doors of the sanctum sanctorum remain closed during this period. The temple bells are not rung. Rituals like aarti too are not performed. The Vaid and the main priest speak to each other in whispers so as to not disturb the Gods who are sick. The Daitya Patis, descendants of aboriginals called Savaras, take charge of the temple during this phase of sickness.

## Same God different Darshan

But how can Lord Jagannath disappoint his devotees who come from distant places to do his darshan? So devotees who visit the Lord Jagannath temple during this period are redirected to Brahmagiri where they can offer their prayers to Alarnath, a form of Vishnu with four hands. It is believed that divinity of Lord Jagannath resides in this the deity of Alarnath for the duration of the quarantine. Splendid Patta Chitra paintings of

these deities are placed in the temple so that devotees can offer their prayers to him even when he is recuperating.

## Preparing for the Rath Yatra

After 14 days, when Lord Jagannatha, Balarama, Subhadra and Sudarshan recover completely, they crave for the food that is cooked by their aunt Gundicha who lives at a little distance from the temple. So Lord Jagannath and his siblings are taken to Gundicha Masi's house on their chariots.

But this annoys Sridevi and BhuDevi because they feel left out. But Lord Jagannath, as usual, pacifies both of them later on with his sweet words and gifts and wins them over.

This occasion, when Lord Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra step out of their quarantine quarters for the first time, marks the beginning of the famous nine-day Jagannath Rath Yatra.

## Nabakalebara

The Nabakalebara ceremony is conducted only when the full moon occurs twice in the month of Ashadha during the Adhik Maasa. This occurs only once in 12 to 19 years. Nabakalebara is a sacred ritual in which the divinity of Lord Jagannath, Subhadra, Balarama and Sudarshana is transferred from their existing bodies into new ones.

Each idol is carved out of a specific neem tree. The idol of Sudarshan Chakra is carved out of a tree which has a reddish hue with three branches and a depression at the centre. The idol of Balarama is carved out of a tree which has light brown bark, seven branches and a sign of a plough or a pestle on it.

The idol of Subhadra is carved out of a tree which has yellow coloured bark with five branches and a symbol of a lotus flower on it. And lastly, the idol of Lord Jagannath is carved out of a tree which has dark-hued bark with four branches and the symbol of a Shankha and Chakra in it.

The divine powers of each deity are transferred by priests who are blindfolded. The old idols are buried according to a prescribed set of rituals in a special place called Koili Baikuntha. The new idols are installed and on the 15$^{th}$ day, the devotees can do the darshan of their beloved deities in their new bodies.

The Agama Shastras too prescribe the same procedure for deities that are carved out of wood. Is that why the Athi Varadar idol at Kanchipuram remains immersed underwater?

**Lord Jagannath leads us by example**

He says, “Look at me. I too am human here. Just like you. I too am born, fall sick, quarantine myself for your welfare, live in Ekanth for 14 days, die and am born again.

You too will die. Like me. But there is nothing to grieve over. For your soul too will be transferred into a different body depending on your Karma. Don’t worry so much about things that are beyond your control. Find your peace. Within yourself. In the here and now. Every day. Do this till your dying day. And leave the rest to me. All is well. And will be. Always. For I stand tall beside you and hold your hand through it all.”